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Autore: Angela Perulli

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CAMBIO

via delle Pandette, 21 - 50127 Firenze

Tel. 055 4374427 Fax: 055 4374931

cambio@dispo.unifi.it



[Beyond Dichotomous Thinking]

The Society of Individuals

For a dynamic sociology

Good manners, African art, death, genius, the modern state, naval profession, time, war, psychiatry are some of the many different questions that Norbert Elias dealt with in his long life of academic activity. And the list could be much longer. At first glance they may seem an eccentric collection of interests having little to do with each other. Yet if we look at them carefully, if we read how they were conceptualized and carried out by the author, we realize that in fact the whole Elias's academic output, sparse until the 1970s and surprisingly prolific afterwards¹, is focused on the same basic questions.

That he dedicated himself to the analysis of court society or that he addressed to the issue of the socialization of parents, that he questioned the mechanisms underlying the reproduction of social inequalities, or that he attempted to explain the rise of Nazism in Germany or the spread of sport in Western societies, at the end we always find a more general question: what is society²? Or in other words: What allows human beings to be who they are? What are the mechanisms allowing the formation and transformation of social groupings? What bonds different human beings, and what distinguishes them, in time and space?

One can observe some constants:

1. The unavoidable and irreducible dynamic of social processes in the life and relations of human beings.
2. The rejection of the use of reified concepts with the consequent search for new processual words and expressions (though with a preference for terms that can be readily and widely understood).
3. Overcoming the dichotomous approach to social analysis through a reconstruction of the main contradictions typical of Western thought, which are nothing but an approximation to the observable reality³.

All these three constants draw the attention to what could be described as the main feature of Eliasian sociology: movement, dynamism, process.

Elias attempts to restore sociological analysis as closely as possible to its object of investigation: society. That is a constantly dynamic reality. If we look at social phenomena in their concreteness they are always in motion. Order is also dynamic. Movement is also persistence.

Elias's effort is then to put at the core of his analysis the dimension of change and persistence.

¹ Among the motivations which drove him into psychoanalysis (he was co-founder of the Group Analysis in 1952) he explicitly indicated the difficulty of writing even in the presence of things to say. See Elias 1995.

² «In many ways sociology seems to be a science in search of a subject» (Elias 1978: 92).

³ The observed reality evokes the concept of everyday life to which E. dedicated a specific essay. This is not the place to dwell too much on this point. However, it is worthwhile to remember that for everyday life Elias precisely means the reality of everyday life as it is. Therefore it represents the primary dimension of observation for the sociologist. This dimension is a key for the possible interpretation of social transformations that affect contemporary societies, also for those slow and long-term transformations, which allow to outline in a processual key the civilization of Western societies (Elias 2009b; see Perulli 2004).

This proposal might be termed a *dynamic sociology*, a *sociology in motion*, which is different from the *sociology of change* - in the sense that in some way it lies within a sociological tradition that accepts the contrast between order and social change. Eliasian sociology instead makes movement a founding element for the analysis, whether we observe phenomena⁴ in their change or in their persistence.

In this essay I shall attempt to explain how the introduction of a dynamic element could help to overcome some impasses of sociology, with a focus on dichotomous oppositions that have accompanied the development of the discipline: individual/society, above all, but also then nature/culture, order/change, local/global.

To look at society in movement means to look at society at all. Elias clearly expressed his position in a passage in *What is Sociology?* Precisely when he reflects about what he identifies as *universals of human society*, the first of them is «humankind's natural changefulness as a social constant» (Elias 1978: 104)⁵. All static forms are artificial forms. Sometimes they could be useful for analysis (in lesser or greater measure) but the empirically observable reality, is always and inevitably a reality in motion⁶.

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Against this background, let us reflect on the presence or absence of dichotomies in Norbert Elias's work, focusing especially on the polarity of individual and society, and through this also dealing with those of nature and society, order and change, and finally local and global.

Research on the relationship that links individuals together and social formations which give life to such links - in rough terms, the relationship between individuals and society - permeates the whole academic output of our author⁷. His starting point is to criticise the self-centred conception of this relationship⁸. This perspective sees "the individual" (conceived as a single being who entirely exists for him or herself) opposed to "society". And "society" is understood as a mere mass or congeries, as deriving from the sum of many single people - and therefore having no structure - or as something that inexplicably exists beyond individuals. In this way, the "single individual" and the plurality of "people" presented as society are, from the ontological point of view, two different things.

⁴ Mennell told me that Elias had objections to the use of "phenomenon", at least towards the end of his career cause he said it was redolent of philosophical "apparitionism".

⁵ Which is actually an unchangeable element. «Their *peculiar changefulness*, which has arisen through evolutionary change, is itself the changeless factor at issue here. But this changeability is not the same thing as chaos. It is a special kind of *order*.» (Elias 1978: 115). For our author the structure of societies based on not human creatures would modify only by changing of their biological change. On the contrary, human societies can change without modifying human biological constitution, t.i. the species. A prove of this would be the transformations in the different forms of integration present in the pre-industrial societies compared to those industrial, or to the passage from hunter-gatherer to agricultural societies.

⁶ In this frame one can fit his critics about the Weberian "ideal-type".

⁷ Although one can find some echo of it also in his non-scientific works.

⁸ This is a very early topic for Elias. See his doctoral dissertation on *Idea and Individual*, now in Elias 2006a [1922] and 2006b [1924].

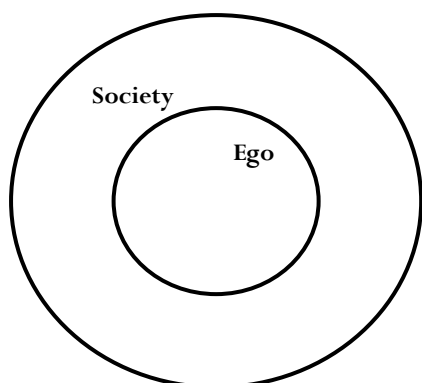


Fig. 1: Representation of the ego-centric view of society

Traditionally in sociological theory there are “individual centred” and “society centred” approaches, which are presented not only as two distinct traditions in the history of sociology, but as aspects difficult to connect - to which Elias responds by overturning that whole point of view. In this case, it is actually misleading to consider the problem of the “supremacy” between the society and the individual. It is a badly posed problem,⁹ which will take us «down blind alleys» (Elias 1991: 87). If we look at the reality, what we *always* see are *people in dynamic interdependence*.

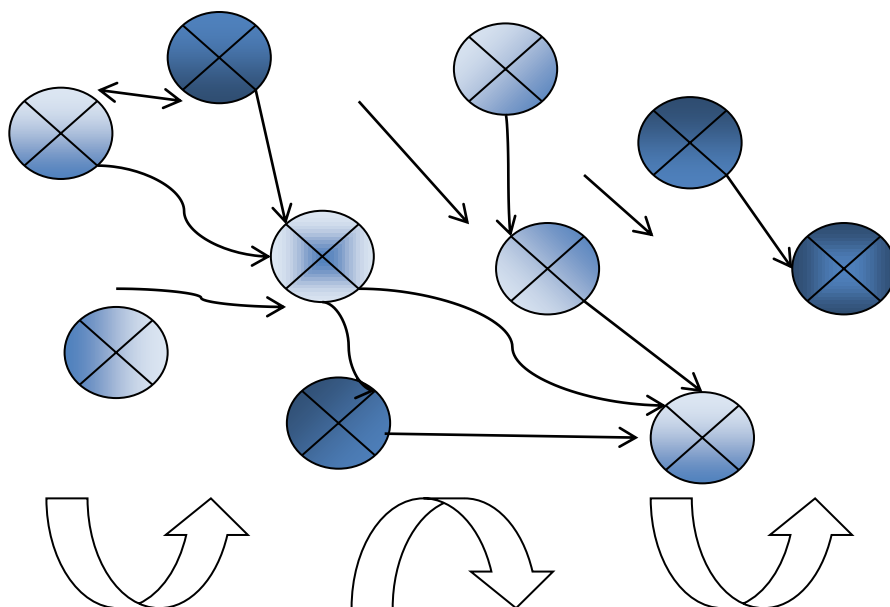


Fig. 2: Social figuration

⁹ See the metaphor of the coin in *The Society of Individuals* (1991).

That is to say: the object of reflection is always people-in-society - *homines aperti* as opposed to *homo clausus*¹⁰, that is, opposed to the intellectual model of the lonely thinking being, isolated from social context (see «the parable of the thinking statues», Elias 1991: 113). Thinking of people in the plurality and not as individuals in the singular is what sociology should do.

The dichotomy between individual and society, says Elias, has roots in a specific form of self-experience, which from the Renaissance onwards has become distinctive of ever-broader strata of European societies. This has led, among other things, to a kind of contraposition between an inner and an outer world. But where is the border? Is it physical? And Elias asks himself: «Is the skin the wall enclosing the true self? Is it the skull or the rib cage? Where and what is the barrier which separates the human inner self from everything outside, where and what the substance it contains?» The brain, the heart, vitals, these bodies are «really the core of individuality, the real self, with an existence apart from the world outside and thus apart from “society” too?» (Elias 1978: 119)¹¹.

Elias tries to “reconcile” this kind of dichotomy, and he does it using the concept of “figuration”. The figuration is presented as an interconnection of actions taken by a group of interdependent human beings¹². Actors perform actions within socially and biologically fixed limits. In addition to the individual-society dichotomy, the concept of figuration also assists in the re-conceptualisation of the *nature-society* dichotomy.

In figurations, in fact, concrete people come into play (with their biological, cultural, social, psychological characteristics and their paths and aspirations¹³) - and not the abstractly conceived individual who acts within more or less formalized rules, interpreting and helping to reinforce or change. Each individual pursues his or her own ends and thereby inevitably acts within boundaries that are given by the historical, geographical, social conditions in which one was born - from the (group and individual) past that is inevitably ever-present in him or her and towards which he or she is orientated. These boundaries are also represented by the social habitus that binds different individuals of the figuration and that is the part that different people

¹⁰ The logic of *homo clausus* responds to a logic of cancellation of the movement dimension, the dynamism that we emphasized at the beginning (*Zustandsreduktion*) and the corresponding drive towards the use of static conceptual categories. To this logic, according to Elias, also corresponds the opposed dichotomy between *personality* and *social system* in Parsons (see also Weber and Popper).

¹¹ Elias also speaks about *invisible barrier* (Elias 1978: 115).

¹² Elias speaks of interdependencies and not of interactions to emphasize that on one side we are never in a position of isolated actors who then interact with others but we are interdependent with others since birth and, secondly, that the mutual influence is not only among those who have the possibility of direct interaction but also among those who are indirectly linked through chains of interdependence”. A similar distinction is also present in Boudon who speaks of “interaction systems” and “interdependence systems” (1991). Through the idea of chains of interdependence is opened the analysis to overcome the dichotomy of micro/macro. See also in this regard Collins 2004.

¹³ And also with their own falls, not adopted ways and not chosen chances.

have in common with each other¹⁴, as well as the shared but *individualised* norms and rules that every person makes her or his own¹⁵.

The boundaries and the constraints are not something external to individuals. Through the habitus we have an example of how the society becomes part of the individual, and contributes to forming him or her, who is always as a growing individual subject to change and transformation throughout the course of his or her existence¹⁶.

The individual thus defined acts and reacts according to his or her own purposes, related to his or her concrete daily experience. The individual goals result in an unplanned form of social life, that is usually called "society"¹⁷. In the determination of individual ends, the quest for survival is central. It occurs not only in biological terms (although these have a relevant importance) but also with regard to the survival of communities, workplaces, social groups, cultures, lifestyles, habits. In response to the different needs for survival, people have historically led their lives within a succession of differently structured "survival units". Therefore we act and react also by virtue of the fear that our world could disappear, that there is a risk in relation to our own survival¹⁸. Through this constant interweaving of actions and reactions we contribute to creating new survival units to which we belong - or if we prefer, we contribute to creating society in its various expressions. However, the game is not unidirectional. We have said, the individual always acts within the boundaries that are socially, historically and geographically inherited, which the individual must necessarily take into account¹⁹. These boundaries may be perceived more as external constraints (*Fremdzwänge*) or as more self-directed (*Selbstzwänge*), depending on the degree of civilization (in the technical sense) reached by the society in which we live; they are not passively subjected to, but interpreted (acted) by each person.

¹⁴ As it is known, the habitus recalls the "social personality structure" or "stage and pattern of individual self-regulation" (Elias 1991: 182). It refers to what one has acquired during the process of socialization, and what is common to a great part of individuals who are living in a certain historical society: «each individual person, different outside the field of science, that each individual person, different as he or she may be from all others, has a specific make-up that he or she shares with other members of his or her society. This make-up, the social habitus of individuals, forms, as it were, the soil from which grow the personal characteristic through which an individual differs from other members of his society» (Elias 1991: 182). As it is known the concept of habitus has been also developed by P. Bourdieu. On the relationship between the two sociologists see Déchaux 1993.

¹⁵ The habitus also consists of «that part which is given as obvious in the experience of individuals, also including those instruments of orientation as time which individuals perceive and tend to consider as natural ...it is "second nature"» (Elias 2007). The study of the habitus could also contribute to "denaturalize" the common sense.

¹⁶ See the manuscript on *Adulthood* (1980).

¹⁷ The first essay of *The Society of Individuals* ends significantly up with the sentence «From plans arising, yet unplanned / By purpose moved, yet purposeless» (Elias 1991: 64). See Mennell 1977.

¹⁸ As it is known in contemporary societies the category of risk is often implicated. See Giddens 1991, Luhmann 1991, Beck 1992.

¹⁹ Let's think to a football game: the figuration is given while the concrete game has been playing, by the footballers who take part, by their moods and feelings, by their relations born on the playground, how that day actors interpret their own role, but also by the playground (by its conditions), by the rules and by the given interpretation. And the figuration can therefore expand besides the players, to the field judge, to the reserve, to the audience too, who are taking part in it. Also to the other games which can be more or less directly bound with this one (to a championship, to a tournament and they also can open themselves towards the past (experience and memory of the already played games) and towards the future (images and expectations to fall back on this particular game on next games and on the final result of the championship). Cf. "Game models" in *What is sociology?*, Ch. 3. In particular to underline what is defined as "primary game", which allows to see how from human relations without norms, one goes across relationships with norms. The fact that relationships are without norms does not mean that they are without a structure. It is a mistake to think that the character of the relationships derives from following their rules (cf. Elias 1978:75-76).

Power ratios

Moreover, with the idea of figuration, power is brought further into focus. Elias conceived of power conceived in relational terms (Heiland and Lüdemann 1991). In any figuration, there is in fact a “shifting power ratio” representing the variable ability to influence (facilitate or limit) others’ choices, actions, desires, and so on. In the case of power, as for society, Elias emphasises the misleading use of the reified concept. «We say that a person possesses great power, as if power were a thing he carried about in his pocket. This use of the word is a relic of magical-mythical ideas. Power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another; it is a structural characteristic of human relationships - of *all* human relationships» (Elias 1978: 74).

The problem of power is for Elias one of the central problems of sociological work. «The necessity for doing this is connected with the obvious difficulty of examining questions of power without becoming emotionally involved. Another person’s power is to be feared: he can compel us to do a particular thing whether we want to or not. Power is suspect: people use their power to exploit others for their own ends. Power seems unethical: everyone ought to be in a position to make all his own decisions. And the mist of fear and suspicion which clings to this concept is understandably transferred to its use in a scientific theory. ... A more adequate solution to problems of power depends on power being understood unequivocally as a structural characteristic of a relationship, all-pervading and, as a structural characteristic neither good nor bad. It may be both» (Elias 1978: 93).

And power ratios are what explains how the pattern of interdependences between human beings tends to result in a figurational flow in a specific identifiable, but unplanned, direction. The more the chances of reciprocal power are distributed among many people, the harder it is for each person to control the wholeness of the figuration, and predict the consequences of their and others’ actions. Elias outlines a series of “game models”, starting with two-person games with an unequal central power ratio, and progressing towards multi-level models with relatively more equal ratios, to demonstrate how this quality of unforeseeability and unplannedness increases.

In this regard, in a continuous intertwining between psychogenesis and sociogenesis we can recall what has been defined as the process of “psychologisation”. Related to the idea that the more the networks of interdependence are formed by a large number of people, more relationships within them become impenetrable and complex. In other words, more people have to pay attention to more people in a wider range of circumstances. This leads to consider more carefully the consequences of their own actions for those with whom they are in one way or other interdependent, and thus to increase the momentum of the “mutual identification” (Mennell, Goudsblom 1998: 18ff.).

The fact that power is a relational concept also implies that there is a mutual recognition of power ratios between those who are involved in a figuration. Those who are in a position of relatively great power become even more powerful owing to the recognition that others give them. This is evident in the search for “established and outsiders” and particularly in the group charisma/group disgrace dynamic that distinguishes the two groups (Perulli 2008).

The place of disorder

In everyday life, real actors, rules, institutions and environment²⁰, come into play in a more or less visible way, even when there is apparently no social order and actors seem to have nothing in common with each other. The description that Elias gives of the crowd in a street of a big city illustrates this:

Most of the people do not know each other. They have hardly anything to do with each other. They push past each other, each pursuing his own goals and plans. They come and go as it suits them. ... In this tumult of scurrying people, for all their individual freedom of movement, there is also a hidden order, not directly perceptible to the senses. Each individual person in this turmoil belongs in a particular place. He has a table at which he eats, a bed in which he sleeps; even the hungry and homeless are both products and parts of the hidden order underlying the *mêlée*. Each of the people who pass has somewhere, at some time, a specific function, property or work, a task of some kind for others, or a lost function, lost possessions and lost work. There are shop assistants and bank clerks, cleaners and society ladies without a profession of their own; there are men who live on interest, policemen, road-sweepers, ruined property speculators, pickpockets and girls with no other function than the pleasure of men; there are paper wholesalers and fitters, directors of a large chemicals concern and the unemployed. As a result of his function each of these people has or had an income, high or low, from which he lives or lived; and as he passes along the street, this function and this income, more openly or more hidden, goes with him. He cannot jump out of it as the humour takes him. He cannot simply switch to another function, even if he wishes to. ... He is obliged to wear a certain form of dress; he is tied to a certain ritual in dealing with others and specific forms of behaviour very different from those of people in a Chinese village or an urban artisans' community in the early Middle Ages. ... Even his freedom to choose among the pre-existing functions is fairly limited. It depends largely on the point at which he is born and grows up within this human web, the functions and the situation of his parents and the schooling he receives accordingly. This too, this past, is also directly present in each of the people scurrying in the city bustle. ... Each of the people who pass each other as apparently unconnected strangers in the street is tied by invisible chains to other people, whether they are chains of work and property or drives and affects (Elias 1991: 13-14).

What we have said until here, as one can easily imagine, has strong similarities with the concept of social network, so prevalent in recent decades. It is worth remarking that as early as 1939 when Elias was talking about "intertwining" or "interweaving" (*Verflechtung*), he was already employing the network metaphor²¹. Afterwards he preferred to talk about "figurations" because, as clearly highlighted by Martuccelli (2000), he emphasised the existence of an always recognisable structure, yet at the same time attaching it to concrete reality²². Therefore he inserted a dynamic dimension, leaving in shadow the concept of network. Every figuration has a structured character. From the sociological point of view «even a situation that appears to be the height of disorder to the people involved in it, forms part of a social order. There is no reason why historical "disorders"- wars, revolutions, rebellions, massacres and power struggles of every kind - cannot be explained. To do that is in fact one of the tasks of sociology. It would be impossible to explain normless conflicts if they had no structure and, in that sense, no order. The distinction between "order" and "disorder",

²⁰ Figurations are always situated in environments. This point recalls the attention on the importance of place in the analysis of everyday life, which dimension, unfortunately, is often underestimated. On the importance of sociological analysis located in concrete places; cf. Giovannini 2001.

²¹ However, we rarely find reference to the Eliasian work in recent literature, which has developed on this metaphor.

²² «Elias résiste tout simplement à une conception par trop "réaliste", "substantialiste" au "mesurable" de la configuration» (Martuccelli 2000: 60).

so significant for the people involved, is sociologically speaking without significance. *Among human beings, as in nature, no absolute chaos is possible*» (Elias 1978: 75-6)²³.

Each element and its properties are such only by virtue of their position in the figuration, to which their chances of power are also linked. There are no isolated individuals, or individuals outside a figuration²⁴. Neither individuals without society nor society without individuals exist.

Therefore the problem can be reformulated as follows:

What kind of formation ... is this "society", that we form together, yet which has not been intended or planned as it is now by any of us, or even all of us together, which only exists if a large number of people exist, which only continues to function if many individual people want and do certain things, yet the structure of which, its great historical transformations, clearly do not depend on the intentions of particular people? (Elias 1991: 69-70)²⁵.

Such a question contains some important factors in the Eliasian reading that we have met and that can be briefly summarised:

- 1) The social formation, the society, exists because there are actions of individuals.
- 2) The structure and its historical transformations are relatively independent of individuals.
- 3) The historical social forms (the societies) that we know are not planned by any of those who were part of previous forms. It is not possible, writes Elias, to discover that some people of the twelfth or the sixteenth century aimed at the industrial society of nowadays in a conscious and planned way²⁶.
- 4) The society is a product and not a reified entity²⁷.

The processuality of social phenomena

However, if the relationship between individuals and social groups can be found through using the concept of figuration, it is necessary to specify that (in this case too) the dimension of dynamism, of movement, is essential to understanding the Eliasian theoretical proposal in its entirety. We have already discussed it, but I should like briefly to linger over it.

The figuration shows itself as an analytical tool able to give an account of an inevitably changing reality, to overcome obstacles related to the habit of stopping the artificial social phenomena in order to analyse them - then forgetting the artifice that has made them. The necessary dynamic of the sociological approach

²³ Elias also uses the concept of "impaired functioning" which is different from Merton's concept of "dysfunction", as it is referred to an ideal image of harmoniously functioning static societies (Elias 1978: 177, note 6).

²⁴ «C'est la notion d'interdépendance et non pas l'ensemble des dépendances matérielles, qui expliquerait en dernier ressort la manière dont les individus se tiennent» (Martucelli 2000: 60).

²⁵ It is to remark that Elias, in analogy with Wright Mills, recurs to the metaphor of sociological imagination, as necessary ability for understanding social dynamics (Elias, 1978: 25, 73, 92).

²⁶ One can see here a clear reference to the unattended effects of social actions that had a great place in sociological contemporary debate. Cfr. Merton 1957 [1949], Boudon 1977.

²⁷ In *What is sociology?* Elias talks about "metaphysics of social structures" (Elias 1978: 16), meaning that peculiar constraint exerted by social structures over those people which would bring to the conception of the society as an anonymous and independent object. «The task of sociology therefore include not only examination and interpretation of specific compelling forces to which people are exposed in their particular empirically observable societies and groups, but also the freeing of speech and thought about such forces from their links with earlier heteronomous models.» (Elias 1978: 18).

suggested by Elias is not limited to the level of (synchronically observable) actions and interdependences that are taking place in a given time. He underlines the need always to keep in mind the dimension of transformation and movement, the process followed by actions, relationships, social phenomena in general²⁸. In other words, the methodological analysis must also address diachronically observable plans²⁹, noting the continuous structuration/destructuration of what is still known. This should happen through the identification of significant events that interrupt, speed up, or decelerate the observed process or modify their direction³⁰. A processual logic applied to the observation of real life, of how real people act and interact, allows us, among other things, to regain a close relationship between historical time, biographical time and everyday time, between individual biographies and long-term transformations in which the same biographies are moving and in turn producing more general transformations. Through the introduction of dynamism takes thus place also a new reconstruction of the individual/society dichotomy.

Let us return to the metaphor of the figuration. Human beings, who form various figurations, are always situated in time and space. Their characteristics are continuously changing. Through a process of more general social transformation (which Elias traces back especially to the general process of civilisation) the individual, as we call him or her today, is making his/her way. That is, to put it in clearer terms, he is a subject who is empowered by a process of "individualisation." Elias clarifies this point well in the third essay of *The Society of Individuals* which deals with the changing balance between "I-identity" and "we-identity". In historical societies, the more the I-identity makes its way at the expenses of the we-identity, the more we are in the presence of an increasing degree of individualisation. The individual defines him/herself and is defined, he/she perceives and is perceived, mainly through his/her uniqueness than by his/her collective belonging.

But he/she is also an individual who changes the course of his/her existence. First as a baby, then as an infant, a teenager, an adult, a senior.³¹ And the way how these changes happen strongly reflects the game of interdependences, the figurations where he/she makes his/her own experiences, and how he/she experienced the previous stages. In this sense, therefore, for Elias, the process of individualisation is also a process of socialisation. The individual is not separated from the society, isolating him/herself. It is a unique way to

²⁸ In a footnote to the third essay of *The Society of Individuals* Elias underlines how «the process-sociological approach does not emerge with sufficient force» in his first writing of 1939, t.i. the first essay of the same volume (Elias 1991: 234, note 3).

²⁹ Elias reserves a particular attention to the linguistic expressions proposing continuously to substitute static with dynamic terms: timing, socialization, individualization, civilization, scientification, courtization. Cf. Mennell 1992: 256.

³⁰ Methodologically the invitation is always directed to keep the level of the empirical observation with that one of a more general theoretical pattern. «The theoretical model of long-term processes of civilization and state formation to which these studies [The Court Society and The History of Manners] gave rise was developed through strict correlation with detailed empirical work, and vice versa, in a dialectical process by which knowledge advances on two levels. Such a process is one of the basic conditions for the verifiability of scientific results. Without this twin-track method, the knowledge value of sociological as of other scholarly investigations remains questionable. Purely empirical investigations – that is, investigations without a theoretical framework – are like sea voyages without a map or a compass. One sometimes chances on a harbour, but the risk of shipwreck is high. Theoretical investigations without an empirical base are usually, at bottom, elaborations of preconceived dogmatic notions; the dogmas are enshrined as a matter of faith, and cannot be refuted or corrected by any empirical proofs or detailed investigations. At most, an attempt is made to buttress them *a posteriori* with a few empirically-related arguments. In this way, one or two felicitous ideas are sometimes to be found floating like blobs of fat on a thin philosophical soup. Some, though certainly not all, attempts to turn the notion of everyday life into a useful sociological concept seem to me to be of this kind.» (Goudsblom, Mennell 1998: 169-70).

³¹ «It would be much more appropriate to say that a person is constantly in movement; he not only goes through a process, he is a process» (Elias 1978: 118). He/ She is a human-being who is developing. And when we talk about development, we mean the immanent order of the continuous sequence within which, every time, a later form derives without interruption from the previous one, the youth from the childhood and the adulthood from the youth. Human being is a process.

carry out the process of identity construction, always in reference to his/her relations with others, (relationships that are always of a processual kind)³².

The difficulty of bringing to the analysis the dynamism in present phenomena and in social formations also arises, from the limits imposed by the *linguistic material* that we have at our disposal. The use of static concepts simplifies the analytical level making it possible «to unleash our power of imagination» (Elias 1978: 92), but at the same time it keeps us away from reality as it is. There is a demand for a «radical reorientation of familiar habits of thought» (Elias 1978: 104) that goes beyond the syntactic construction based on a noun that refers to an immovable object, which is accompanied by a verb, to which is assigned the task of imparting a sense of movement. Such a construction leads to reduce processes to static conditions (Elias speaks of “process reduction”): the wind blows, as if it would exist regardless the blowing (see Elias 1978: 112). This trend «in many cases is an unsuitable technique for conceptualising what we really observe. This constant process-reduction results in the changeless aspects of all phenomena being interpreted as most real and significant. It extends to spheres where it imposes a totally false limitation» (1978: 112)³³. This would be one of the main causes of the artificial separation of the actor from the action, the structure from the process, the object from the relationship, with the serious consequence to strongly preventing the understanding of those human relationships that are the object of sociology³⁴.

As it is known, as a young man Elias came into close contact with Alfred Weber. The echo of Weber's work is seen in particular in the idea of long-term processes and their role in culture (A. Weber 1998 [1921], cf. Roversi 1987). Elias takes up these ideas, though abandoning normativity bound up with the idea of progress.

By “social process” Elias means incremental long-term transformations of the interdependences (of the figurations) or part of them. It covers at least three generations, and it can show one visible direction or two opposite directions (one ascending and the other one descending).

A peculiarity of social processes is that they are bipolar, in contrast to biological processes which are not reversible. The bipolarity is based on conceptual pairs, which the same Elias mentions: integration and disintegration, involvement and detachment, civilisation and decivilisation, growth and decline. They can be useful both in understanding the direction of a process and defining the “structural antithesis” within the processual movement over a given period. They are essential to determining the phases or the stage of a social process³⁵.

What Elias criticises, then, is not so much the use of dichotomous pairs when analytically useful, but their use in an oppositional and static key. Eliasian sociology is dynamic and relational. The dichotomies may then be used if they are considered as elements relating to each other: the poles of a continuum, the diver-

³² Criticism to the weberian distinction between individual action and socio-individual action (Elias 1979: 120-122).

³³ This limitation is not noticed by those who are grow up in such linguistic communities (it appears *natural*; as it occurs for any components of the social habitus).

³⁴ «It can be unequivocally said that both the tendency in science to process-reduction and the theories of science which raise this to the status of an ideal, *have outlived their fruitfulness*» (Elias 1978: 114).

³⁵ «Let's think of concepts like norm and value, structure and function, social class or social system. The very concept of society has this character of an isolated object in a state of rest, and so has that of nature. The same goes for the concept of the individual. Consequently we always feel impelled to make quite senseless conceptual distinctions, like the *individual and society*, which makes it seem that the *individual* and *society* were two separated things, like tables and chairs, or pots and pans. One can find oneself caught up in long discussions of the nature of the relationship between these two apparently separate objects. Yet on another level of awareness one may know perfectly well that societies are composed of individuals, and that individuals can only possess specifically human characteristics such as their abilities to speak, think, and love, in and though their relationships with other people – *in society*» (Elias 1978: 113).

gent direction of a phenomenon (involvement and detachment), elements that mutually contribute to define themselves (established and outsiders, group charisma and group disgrace)³⁶. We also have to stress that social processes and human beings (individual actions) are inseparable.

But no person is a beginning. Just as individual speech emerges from an existing society-specific language, all other individual actions grow out of social processes already in operation. It is true that social processes themselves have a greater or lesser relative autonomy in relation to particular actions of individual people ... But they are anything but independent of people, and therefore of human actions. If human beings stopped planning and acting, there would be no social processes. Social processes have a greater or lesser degree of independence, not in relation to people in general, but in relation to particular individual people and their planning and actions (Elias 2009a [1986]: 7).

In Eliasian thinking, daily life is the main source for the sociologist, who sees the concrete individuals at work - with their we-identity and I-identity, their habitus - who act and react in networks of interdependencies, contributing to creating those social institutions, those norms and values upon which the same actions are performed, and slowly help to form the various societies that historically (and geographically) people have formed, with their power differentials, their stratification systems, their beliefs, their practices, their habits, their bureaucratic structures, their environments, their horizons, their survival units. The idea of social figuration, as we have seen, is the key that keeps it all together. In view of social phenomena in terms of figurational flow Elias rejects the idea that is possible to locate a precise origin of a phenomenon by summarising the arguments about the development of knowledge and of societies in the long-term process through the use of the idea of the triad of the main controls (Elias 1990, cf. Mennell 1989). Through the idea of the triad, the level of development reached by a society can be seen in relation to: a) the extension of its control over the forces of nature, (technological development), b) the extent of its ability to control interpersonal relationships on the events or on "social forces", c) the extension of control that each individual is able to exert on him/herself (self-constriction), linked to the process of individualisation³⁷. While undergoing a civilising process (including monopolisation of violence by the state, the spread of the habit of self-repression, modesty, control of spontaneity) people learn to prefer a growing distance between themselves and their object of observation; increasingly they use the language and methods developed in the natural sciences, feeling more and more markedly the difference between their individual identities and their collective identity. The ability of human beings to get out of their clothes, look at living and acting at a distance, is biologically based but is explained much more strongly by the higher level of development of the society to which it belongs.

These three elements develop in close interconnection to each other; they are interdependent and are related to the type of development of knowledge. However, this interdependence must not be understood as necessitating parallel development. It is a more complex plot. The connection between the first two is neither simple nor straightforward. The increase of human beings' capacity to develop a more detached view of natural forces and to control them has tended to increase the difficulties they have in extending their control over themselves, social relations and their own ways of thinking. The reason is that, when human beings

³⁶ See Delzescaux 2001.

³⁷ Martuccelli underlines the relation between the increasing self-control and the more or less great cohesion of a social group. It is more difficult to become adults for those who live in outsiders' groups. They are without armour, failing shared and uniforming norms and values. Relation between self-control and conformism. The modern individual can develop only in a context where he/she is kept outside: where social institutions are strong and very regulating (Martuccelli 2000: 64 and followings).

have gradually come to understand natural forces, they have always feared them less and they have increasingly used them for their purposes. Human relations have undergone hand in hand to specific changes. More and more people have become increasingly interdependent in longer chains and increasingly dense networks - towards which the individual has felt less safe, because less able to keep them under control. The same process that reduces the danger and the sense of insecurity against natural forces tends to increase the sense of insecurity regarding to "social forces". If we introduce the third element, the matter is more complicated. Elias argues that, on the one hand, when people are in a situation of fear and vulnerability it is difficult for them fully to control their deepest feelings and relate to events with a certain degree of detachment, as well as to control the course of events. On the other hand it is also difficult to extend their understanding and control over these events long enough to be able to develop a certain degree of detachment and a greater control over themselves. This dual mechanism may hinder the growth of knowledge on all three levels of the triad (technological, social and psychological). But this is too simple. The interconnection among the three levels can also work to reverse this process.

In the study of social sciences, therefore, the aspects connected with experience - the psychological aspects, feelings, desires, ways of thinking - are also important. To think in processual terms permits highlighting the interconnections among all these plans, showing the difference between the process of biological evolution (irreversible) and social development (that is, history), which is instead irreversible (knowledge can be forgotten).

In other words, with the processual approach³⁸, we try to overcome the dualism that has long characterised sociology, that dualism which has opposed the social to the natural, the individual to society, the micro to the macro, action to structure.

Testing processual sociology: time and timing

Among the numerous papers and topics covered by Norbert Elias that could be used to elaborate on what has been said so far, I have chosen the theme that is most closely intertwined with dynamism and movement: time. I wish to conclude this paper by reflecting on how overcoming the dichotomous approach through processual logic is fundamental to the social process of "timing".

We have seen that the distinction of social and natural is for Elias one of those false dichotomies supported by disciplinary divisions that have a negative value for him. People in industrial societies have internalised their conception of time in such a way that it is experienced as 'natural', and they can hardly imagine a conception of time other than their own, much less an absence of it. We do not recognise that the determination of time is learned and therefore it is recognised that social constraints are as strong as natural ones³⁹.

One difficulty lies in the pre-linguistic expressions we generally use - measuring, sparing - as if there were really something to be measured and determined. It is the use of the language that leads to the reification of

³⁸ Elias prefers to define his sociology a processual (and not figurational) sociology.

³⁹ In societies where it operates, the time is not learnt just as a concept but also (even more) as a social institution. Already from the beginnings we can notice its hetero-constrain (primary socialization), we must learn to develop an apparatus of self-constrain. Even in the case of the time we can talk about "individualization of a given society", as it is a symbol that all individuals, from a certain stage of their social process, must learn to orientate themselves (for example the language). Compared to the language, time is learned in a later stage of human development. It appears as a constriction; as one of the constraints of the many on the individual (both together natural and social). It is, among other things, an example of how the civilizing process contributes to shape the social habitus, which is typical of each individual structure of the personality.

time, transforming it into an object. It would be better, Elias suggests, to use the verb form *to time*, in the sense of assigning a temporal collocation (see Nowotny 1991). Why? Because for Elias *timing* means to correlate; it is the result of this relation. From what does the need to time grow? The positions and sequences that take place in the ceaseless flow of becoming are not next to each other and cannot be directly comparable. We take then the recurring sequences and we use them as a standardised reference (solar cycles, clocks' hands running)⁴⁰.

In Elias's words, «Timing is thus based on people's capacity for connecting with each other two or more different sequences of continuous changes, one of which serves as a timing standard for the other (or others) [...] The concept of time refers to properties which sequences of continuous changes have in common, regardless their differences in kind» (Elias 2007: 60).

The relationship we are discussing is involving three components: individuals (who have a capacity for synthesis) and two or more forms of a continuum that are put in relation to each other and among which one serves as a framework or unit of measurement for the other. Let us try to analyse these elements.

In the first place the determination of time is based on a human being's ability to connect two or more sequences to each other or many sequences of continuous changes. Elias's theory of time is actually based on the ability that human beings have to use symbols and on the accumulation of knowledge through generations (formation of an intergenerational capital). In order to establish that something is happening "before" or "after", the presence of a potential synthesis is required, which is typically human - namely the ability to make connections through the use of symbols. And this is an innate (biologically given) ability, which is, however, activated and shaped through experience and which is central to the meaning of human orientation. The specific manifestation of the capacity that is required for any form of temporal determination is the ability that individuals have to see in their mind's eye what happened earlier, together with what happened later and what is happening now, connecting them in a link as if it were a single picture. In this operation an important role is played by memory. Humans have less sense of direction through instincts than other animals. Their orientation is primarily learned through perceptions both individually and as a heritage of previous generations⁴¹. And this ability to learn through intergenerational processes leads to the gradual expansion over centuries of the meanings of human orientation. Elias argues that "time", as we know it today, represents a means of orientation, which is configured and evolved through a long and slow process of intergenerational learning. Time is not therefore only a relationship but also an ability to correlate. But this alone does not consider the form that time assumes in different societies.

The increasing differentiation and complexity of the structure of interdependences has also gone hand in hand with the development of a particularly complex system of self-constraint and self-regulation, which also has a keen sensitivity towards time. The configuration of "external" time (calendars, clocks, agendas) is a fine form of social constraint - omnipresent, although discrete, non-violent - which cannot be avoided. Social constraint promotes the formation of the individual self-constraint and is closely related to the process of civilisation. Self-regulation based on "time", found almost everywhere in most developed societies, is neither a biological fact, a part of human nature, nor a metaphysical one, a part of a priori imaginary, but it is a social fact, an aspect of social structure in the making of human personality and thus an integral part of every individual.

⁴⁰ It is fictitious the conceptual division between time related to historical sequences and physical sequences, like as it is - we have already seen - the separation between social and natural environment.

⁴¹ It is one of the universals of human society, linked to three factors: 1) the relative freedom, due to the biological constitution of human being, from the unlearned behavioural mechanisms 2) unlimited mutability of human behaviour and experience within natural boundaries 3) the child is constitutionally designed to learn from other people.

Thus far, we have discussed links in general succession. We could point out a difference that would recall what has been mentioned before: the difference between concepts of synthesis such as past-present-future and now, and day-month-year. While the latter are indeed in effect the time structure of the course of events, the former also include in their meaning humans who carry out the synthesis and see before them the course of events and its temporal structure. So there are two categories of temporal concepts: one in which humans do not determine the sequence, one in which they do. This will give us what Elias calls “temporal concepts related to the structure” and “temporal concepts related to the experience”.

Further difficulties in moving around the concept of time arise from the effectiveness of symbols that have been developed for the determination of time. They are so adapted to reality, so well adapted to their purpose, that it is difficult to separate reality from the symbol. For example, let us take the distinction between the sequence of events in the life of a person on the one hand and the relationship between this sequence and that of the calendar on the other. The result is that humans find it difficult to resist the feeling that ‘time’ goes by, although in reality it is the natural course of their lives.

This “fetish” character of time is also reflected in the wristwatch and in its symbolic meaning. In urban societies, Elias says, clocks take on the role of what was covered by masks in the pre-urban societies: «one knows they are made by people but they are experienced as if they represented an extra-human existence. Masks appear as embodiments of spirits. Clocks appear as embodiments of “time” [but] they indicate “time”» (Elias 2007: 97). Time is not a substance. The key issue is therefore the symbolic aspect. The symbols created by humans which appear on the clock are the time. The symbolic aspect of the equipment is not separable from the physical. The peculiarity of time-unit measurement is its constant motion. The movement is relatively independent from what it measures and it is unilinear (even if circular), continuous in one direction (even if repeated) and with uniform (not accelerated) speed.

Humans in the past did not experience sequences of events in the same way as today - as a uniform and continuous flow. Time is a concept with a high level of synthesis and requires a comprehensive level of knowledge of how to measure temporal sequences and their regularity. In primordial stages humans had no such knowledge, not because they were less intelligent, but because this knowledge needed much time in which to develop. Among the first instruments for determining time were the movement of the sun, moon and stars. The level of synthesis did not involve even the conceptualisation of units such as days, months and years. The ability “to time” has grown slowly over the centuries.

When was there a need for it? For agriculture. The need to regulate agricultural activities - planting, harvesting - required a shift from a passive to a more active attitude towards time. Elias has numerous examples from ethnography and literature describing the role of priests in the determination of time. They scrutinized the recurrence of the moon (even when it had not yet been conceived in terms of a cycle) and told the community the starting time of certain activities - when they had to start sowing, for example. The priest therefore determined the rhythms of individual and social life, as he had contacts with the spirits that were thought to be messengers of heavenly bodies, which were thought to be the main instruments for time calculations. In these simpler societies time tends to have a discontinuous character. Time determiners are neither possible nor necessary. All that are needed are a few pointers of when activities should take place.

The shift towards a continuous idea of time and time consciousness took shape very gradually in connection with the growth of increasingly numerous and more complex social organisations so that different activities had to be coordinated and synchronised. Power has been gradually transferred to secular authorities as determiners of time, a process accompanying the formation of the modern state, which is another important aspect Elias’s work. The creation and maintenance of a standard timeframe became increasingly the prerogative of the central authorities, as the history of the calendar to which Elias devotes ample space in his text.

To the first temporal scales, based on the genealogy of ruling families, followed long irreversible time sequences that could develop when the church and the state became themselves long-term entities. The state is a durable unit, a requirement for a conception of time as linear flow. Le Goff (1977) pointed out that the calendar favoured the manipulation of two key instruments of power: taxes and the census. "Calendar" means free from the accounts, because the interests on the loans were paid on the Calends, the first day of the month for the Romans. In 1370 Charles V ordered that all the bells of Paris, which were the instruments of social life rhythms, had to be regulated by the clock of the royal palace, which rang at hours and quarters. The new time became the time of the state. The clergy continued to play a role, but the means of temporal orientation often became the monopoly of secular power.

Time is thus an example of how a widely used symbol, once detached from all observable data, can take on a life of its own in the language and minds of humans. One reason for the force exerted by temporal constraints on individuals is the fact that "time" itself is common to all individuals of a certain group. Individuals must define their behavior in accordance with the "time" established by the group to which they belong. It is part of what Elias defines as "second nature" (the social habitus), which is one of the constraints of the civilization which are not typical of human nature, but which are only made possible by it.

As we have seen, for Elias the temporal configuration of every society depends on the fact that: 1) humans have, as part of their natural equipment, a general potential of synthesis (connection among events); 2) the specific links and the corresponding concepts are the result of learning and experience, and this means not just individuals, but a very long chain of human generations, which transmits the learned knowledge from member to member. The need to reverse the background behind the theory of knowledge of a universal starting point is therefore emphasized as well as the idea that underlies human knowledge is the result of a long learning process for humankind, a process that has no beginning; 3) the need to have any concept at a large scale of abstraction depends on the complexity of human social figurations.

Looking at time as a result of human social activity - instead of as "natural" object - allows us to go beyond dichotomous approaches (i. e. individual vs. social; personal vs. collective; natural vs. cultural; internal vs. external; subjective vs. objective) that are strictly bound to this peculiar social orientation and perhaps overcome the social anxiety belonging to the idea of time as resource.



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